About the Study: Information for Parents

Study: Can Robots Think?
Researchers: Henry Wellman & Kimberly Brink, University of Michigan Department of Psychology

Thanks For Participating!

With your permission, your child participated in a study that explored how children think about robots. To test this, we showed children a video of a robot and then asked them questions about it, like, “Can this robot think for itself?” “Does the robot have feelings, like happy or sad?” And we also asked how the children felt about the robot, like, “How does the robot make you feel, weird or happy?”

Other studies have shown that adults think some robots can think (at least a little) and have definite feelings about some robots as nice and some as weird. In fact for adults, if a robot is too human that’s weird. But no research has looked at children. Maybe children judge that all robots can think, or maybe very young children do so but older children do not. That’s what we’ll find out.

Why are we interested in this? Smart technology like smart phones (including for example Siri on iPhones) and robots are an increasing part of everyday life. What ideas do children have about theses devices? Is it easy or hard for them to learn from such technology, relative to adults? Do they find some robots, as opposed to others, easy to “like” or easy to learn from? Answers to these questions will help us know what children think and feel about these increasingly prevalent devices, and in the long run can lead to information about how best design smart technology to make it user-friendly for children.

Because the future is likely to have more of these devices interacting with people, knowing more about these things in children is important.

Try It At Home!

Probably you have at least some smart devices in your home: iPads, smart phones, apps that talk to you, that teach you a foreign language, interactive video games, interactive music devices or books. Not to mention movies and clips of robots (like Big Hero 6, WALL-E). Try asking your child what he or she thinks about those devices at home. Older children might enjoy having more “philosophical” conversations about whether or not machines can think or how they think, what robots in the future may or may not be able to do, if robots can lie (or more simply make mistakes), and so on.

Thanks Again For Your Help!

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact Henry Wellman at hmw@umich.edu or Kimberly Brink at kabrlink@umich.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB-HSBS), 2800 Plymouth Rd., Building 520, Room 1169, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800, (734) 936-0933 [or toll free, (866) 936-0933], Fax: 734-936-1852, irbhsbs@umich.edu.